

Explain to your child the behavior you expect ahead of time, as well as what the clear and reasonable consequences will be if they do not behave appropriately.

Be prepared for difficult situations. Explain to your child ahead of time what they can expect even when it may be unpleasant (such as waiting in long lines, going to the doctor's office). Bring along snacks and toys to distract your child and keep him or her busy.

#### Be Consistent

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##### Principle:

Children thrive on consistency. When her or she knows the world is predictable and certain, your child knows he or she can behave in ways that "worked" in the past. When life is unpredictable and uncertain, your child does not know what to expect and cannot rely on past experiences to know how to act. Providing your child with a consistent environment allows him or her to use what they have learned about what is and is not appropriate behavior in given situations and contexts.

##### Practices:

Always follow through on consequences you have established ahead of time, making sure they are fair and reasonable.

If your child earns a reward for good behavior, never take it away for inappropriate behavior.

Provide a consistent routine for your child. Whenever possible have regular times for meals, studying, and bedtime.

When your child misbehaves, explain why that choice of behavior was inappropriate and ask him or her to generate suggestions for how they can make better choices next time they are in a similar situation.

Remember that being consistent does not mean being rigid. Any form of discipline will not work with all children all of the time. Being an effective parent means being willing to adapt your parenting *practices* to a specific child or situation while still being consistent in your parenting *principles*. If circumstances change, it is reasonable for you to change rules and expectations if a situation requires it.



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## Principles and Practices of Effective Discipline:

### Advice for Parents



By Elizabeth T. Gershoff, Ph.D.

Disciplining your child is one of the most important and hardest jobs you have. Yet few of us are ever taught how to discipline our children effectively. Most of us learn “on the job” or repeat what our parents did with us. This unfortunately means we sometimes use discipline methods that are familiar but not effective.

This pamphlet summarizes four main principles of effective discipline that have developed from years of work with children and families. Under each principle are suggestions for ways to put the principle into practice.

## Guide, Not Punish 1

### Principle:

The goal of discipline is to teach your child acceptable behavior. Children learn how to behave only when you tell or show them how. Punishment shows your child what *not to do*; only guidance and teaching show him or her what *to do*. Your child will behave better when motivated by the promise of success rather than by threats of punishment.

### Practices:

Be realistic, and expect your child to act like a child.

View their misbehavior as a mistake in judgment. Often what an adult sees as misbehavior is really the result of a child trying to learn about his or her environment.

Show by your example how to behave appropriately and how you manage your own anger and frustration.

With children younger than three years old, use redirection, distraction, and/or supervision. It may also be necessary to physically change the situation to prevent your child from reaching something inappropriate; some examples include moving a chair in front of an electrical socket, or putting up a safety gate to prevent a child from approaching a staircase or other unsafe area. No form of punishment is appropriate for children of these ages.

With children three years old or older, give them practice in making choices when it is reasonable for them to do so. For example, saying “Which do you want to do first, brush your teeth or take a bath?” presumes your child will be doing both but allows your child to feel a small measure of control over the order of events. Providing your child the opportunity to choose between safe choices will give him or her the chance to experience the consequences of their choices.

Use words, not hitting, to discipline your child. No one has a right to hit anyone else in the household, and that includes spanking children. Remember, discipline is all about teaching. Your child learns how to treat others by how they are treated. If you hit your child, you are teaching that violence is an acceptable problem-solving tool.

When punishments are necessary, make them logical consequences to your child's behavior with reasons.

For example:

1) If a three year-old writes on the wall, have him or her help you clean it off.

*The reason you give:* As a member of the family, he or she is expected to respect and to help take care of your home.

2) If an eight-year-old runs into the street, say he or she has to stay inside for the rest of the day.

*The reason you give:* You have to be sure he or she stays safe.

3) If a sixteen year-old comes home after a curfew you and he or she have agreed upon ahead of time, he or she is not allowed to go out at night the following weekend.

*The reason you give:* He or she has betrayed your trust and needs to earn it again before you can let him or her stay out late.

Use teaching time-outs. Sometimes the only way to stop a child's inappropriate behavior is to remove them from the problematic situation; this will allow both you and your child some time to “cool down.” One option is to send your child to a time out area to come up with a plan for improved behavior (e.g., “How can you and Sarah both play with that toy you're fighting over?”). Be sure the time out area is one in which you can still see and hear the child; avoid using isolation as a punishment as this is emotionally upsetting. If the child is still in time-out after a reasonable amount of time (never more than 5-10 minutes), help them create a plan. Using time outs this way, you are teaching your child to behave appropriately, solve-problems and take responsibility for their behavior.

## Focus on the Positives 2

### Principle:

Effective discipline hinges on a positive, trusting, and respectful relationship between you and your child. When you develop a positive relationship with your child, he or she will be more motivated to behave well.

### Practices:

Each day, give your child as many “positives”, such as hugs, encouragement, praise, or guidance, as you can.

Each day, engage in as few “negatives”, such as yelling, spanking, or shaming, as you can.

Catch your child being good. The best way to encourage children to repeat a positive behavior is to praise them for doing it.

Develop a trusting relationship with your child by protecting them from harm, by being honest and trustworthy, and by exhibiting predictable and mature behavior. If you make a mistake in dealing with your child, say you are sorry. Apologies build trust.

Frame things positively by telling your child the behavior you expect, not just what you do not want them to do. Some examples include, “Keep your hands to yourself” (instead of, “Stop hitting your sister”) and “You can go outside to play as soon as you clean up your room” (instead of, “You cannot go outside to play unless you clean up your room”). The differences in wording are subtle but important for teaching your child how you expect him or her to behave.

Always express disappointment in the behaviors, never in the children themselves. Your child needs to know that you will always love them, even when you are not always happy about their choice of behavior.

Spend some time each day focused entirely on your child. Children sometimes misbehave in order to get any attention from their busy parents. If you spend positive time with your child, he or she will not need to misbehave to get your attention. *Some examples include:*

- 1) sitting with your child and talking about the day
- 2) making a meal or snack together
- 3) playing a game together
- 4) taking a walk around the neighborhood together
- 5) reading a story together

## Be Prepared 3

### Principle:

A crucial component of effective discipline is providing guidelines and expectations for appropriate behavior ahead of time. In other words, parents' discipline work consists not only of reacting to misbehavior but also of preparing your child for situations and providing clear expectations for how they should behave. Such preparation can prevent your child from misbehaving in the first place.

### Practices:

Establish a few important yet reasonable limits and guidelines for your child's behaviors and explain them to your child. Keep in mind that you will need to repeat these explanations over time to be sure your child remembers and accepts them. Create a safe environment for your child. Put unsafe things out of reach. Infants and young children should always be supervised by an adult.